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Establishing a strategic thinking approach at the University of Zambia: Implications on pre-strategic and evolutionary strategic thinking phases

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to establish the use of strategic thinking variables in a public university, the University of Zambia. Nine constructs of strategic thinking variables in this study are framed as strategic thinking general, thinking in time, intently focused, systems perspective, intelligent opportunism, hypothesis-driven, reframing, reflecting, and environmental analysis. A qualitative research design encompassing a review of documents and archival records, direct observation, and sense-making informed the evidence gathered in this study. The pre-strategic thinking phase covers the period 1966 to 1993, while the nascent strategic thinking phase covers the period 1994 to 2012 and the evolutionary strategic thinking phase covers the period 2013 to 2022. The findings of this study have revealed that in the pre-strategic thinking phase, the University was guided by the national development agenda for human capital development. The absence of an Institutional strategic plan and associated strategy documents points to a disconnection between optimal strategy and the strategic intentions of the University managers. In both the nascent strategic thinking phase and the evolutionary phase, significant gaps exist in the utilization of strategic thinking variables thinking in time, reframing, reflecting, environmental analysis, focused intent, and intelligent opportunism. This study suggests the University of Zambia should engage employees in the use of strategic thinking variables, with a view to increasing the chances of organizational success. Further, it seems possible that the hitherto limited use of strategic thinking as a practice in the University of Zambia may be hindering the achievement of organizational set goals. Through this conceptualization, this paper has attempted to fill a gap in strategic thinking literature as it pertains to public universities.

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Introduction

As the nation's first University, the University of Zambia is a public university with an important role in national development. However, the University of Zambia faces many strategic and operational challenges resulting in a consistent and growing operating deficit for sixteen years leading to 2020 from 2004, UNZA (2004 and 2016). A commonly held view is that the challenges of the University of Zambia could be resolved with adequate funding. However, the problem of funding may also be an indication of the extent to which strategic thinking variables are used and therefore this study explored how the use of strategic thinking variables could be the missing link in explaining the challenges that the university has been faced with.

In the face of increased local and international competition, public universities have begun a search for a unique positioning in order to attract students and meet the expectations of multiple stakeholders. Public universities are also seeking to leverage on technology to adapt to a more established national and international education market, (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Further, attempts are being made to adapt to changes in higher education policy and legislation on funding and governance of public universities too. Public university financial and non - financial performance have also come under increased public scrutiny (Guthrie & Neumann, 2007) with some stakeholders expecting a more enterprising public university endowed with alternative revenue sources (Clark, 1998) which are in sync with new models of financing public higher education.

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This research is motivated by the lack of any comprehensive studies that have been carried out on strategic thinking in the higher education sector in Zambia. On the African Sub-continent however, a recent study on strategic thinking investigated the relationship between strategic thinking and leadership effectiveness in Kenyan indigenous banks, (Muriithi, Louw, & Radolf, 2018). This study established a positive relationship between strategic thinking and leadership competency in Kenya's indigenous banks.

The objective of this study was to explore the extent to which the strategic thinking variables have been applied at the University of Zambia in each of the following phases: Pre - strategic thinking phase; Nascent strategic thinking phase and; The Evolutionary phase.

This paper is organised as follows. The first part presents a brief discussion of literature on strategic thinking and proceeds to conceptualize the same. The research methodology used in this study is then discussed after which findings and a discussion of the findings are presented. The last part offers conclusions with a perspective on managerial implications and pathways for further research.

Conceptual Background

Strategic thinking has been identified as a critical management tool which organisations utilise to drive effective strategies. Strategic thinking is important when dealing with complex phenomena.

Strategic thinking in an organization requires a combination of information processing and creativity (Kutschera & Ryan, 2009). Dhir & Mital (2012) suggest that strategic thinking implies collecting information, formulating ideas and planning actions and that each activity requires different thinking skills. It is a continuous inquiry into how the organisation is functioning, directing strategy in the organization on the basis of an understanding of the organisation's contexts and through a multi-level dialogue with its constituents.

The work of Liedtka (1998) is instrumental in drawing attention to strategic thinking as a creative, disruptive, future focused, and experimental in nature and is seen to be at odds with traditional notions of strategic planning. Strategic thinking is about thinking in time. It is about being intelligently opportunistic. Liedtka (1998) adds that strategic thinkers understand the connections across functions and departments, between the organisation and suppliers and clients. They are also able to see the connections in the system and understand the relationship between the functional, business and corporate levels of strategies to the external context from a vertical perspective. Graetz (2002) indicates that strategic thinking involves combining a rational and convergent approach to a creative and divergent thought process. Abraham (2005) has observed that strategic thinking is about finding alternative ways of competing and providing customer value.

Strategic thinking is also founded on the idea that it can be measured in a four items scale for measuring strategic thinking following findings obtained from literature, text evaluation and interviews with industry and subject specialists (Dhir, Dhir, & Samanta, 2018). It was concluded that strategic thinking involves, reflection, demonstrating organisational awareness, performing trend analysis and recognising patterns which require strategic action from time to time.

Strategic Thinking

In this paper, strategic thinking is defined as a mental process aimed at solving complex problems which involve conceptual thinking, system oriented, directional and opportunity oriented and thus leads to new and imaginative organisational strategies, Goldman & Casey (2010). The sub variables of strategic thinking presented are thinking general, thinking in time, Intent focused, systems perspective, intelligent opportunism, hypothesis driven, reframing, reflecting and environmental analysis.

Jelenc (2008) and Liedtka (1998) suggested that strategic thinking general is the ability of leaders to comprehend issues facing them in their leadership tasks in relation to their organisational current and future performance. The systems perspective refers to a mental model of an organisational system with a proper understanding of the interaction and interdependence of various elements, Bonn (2001) and Liedtka (1998). Thinking in time denotes the ability to assess the past and the present in order to determine the future to pursue. Thinking in time is about using the information available to establish existing gaps and how to address them, (Liedtka, 1998; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998).

Intent-focused implies attaining a particular position or point of view in the long-term performance of an organisation. It is about consistency in pursuing competitiveness. Intent focused places a premium on optimism about success of initiatives and its leadership demonstrates consistency in where the organisation should be by demonstrating commitment to resolve problems and encouraging organisation culture that allows for success, (Jelenc, 2008; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998). Intelligent opportunism refers to the leadership's ability to focus on its effort rather than on the organisation, and ensure that contradictory or limited information does not affect making the right decisions, (Jelenc, 2008; Liedtka, 1998; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998). In intelligent opportunism, an organization finds new competitive areas, demonstrates awareness of participation of middle managers, demonstrates awareness of organisational strengths and weaknesses and demonstrates consciousness about the main strategic problems of the University. In addition, in intelligent opportunism, consideration of input of strategies from lower level management suitable for a changing environment is evident, (Jelenc, 2008; Liedtka 1998; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998).

A hypothesis driven organisation is denoted by leadership's ability to adjust their organisations to respond to environmental challenges, (Liedtka, 1998; Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1998). Such an organisation will look for fundamental long-term corrective measures and changes in the organisation structure that would lead to significant enduring improvement. Reframing is the capability of leaders to switch attention across multiple viewpoints, mental models and frames as well as paradigms in order to create new visions and choices for actions, (Pang & Pisapia, 2012; Pisapia, 2009). Reframing is about seeking different perceptions, tracking trends by asking everyone if they notice changes in the organisation's context, asking those around you what they think is changing, engaging in discussions with those whose values differ from yours, using different viewpoints to map out strategies and listening to everyone's version before making a decision.

Reflecting is the capability to combine rational and logical thinking together with experimental thinking through experience, information and perceptions to produce judgement in relation to what has happened to create intuitive principles which direct what is happening in the present time to help in directing their future actions, (Pang & Pisapia, 2012). Reflecting involves reconstructing an experience, accepting one's assumptions could be wrong, asking why questions when trying to solve a problem, framing problems from different perspectives, setting aside time to think about how you succeeded or failed and taking into account the effects of decisions others have made in similar situations.

Environmental analysis looks at organisational strengths and opportunities, places at its centre internal and external analysis, emphasizes the importance of recognizing the internal and external dynamics in the environment and encourages understanding of the strategic issues the organization is faced with, (Alkalbi and Idrees, 2009). Environmental analysis is the ability to recognise trends and events which exist in an organisation's environment that enable the recognition of technological and market opportunities, (Danneels, 2008).

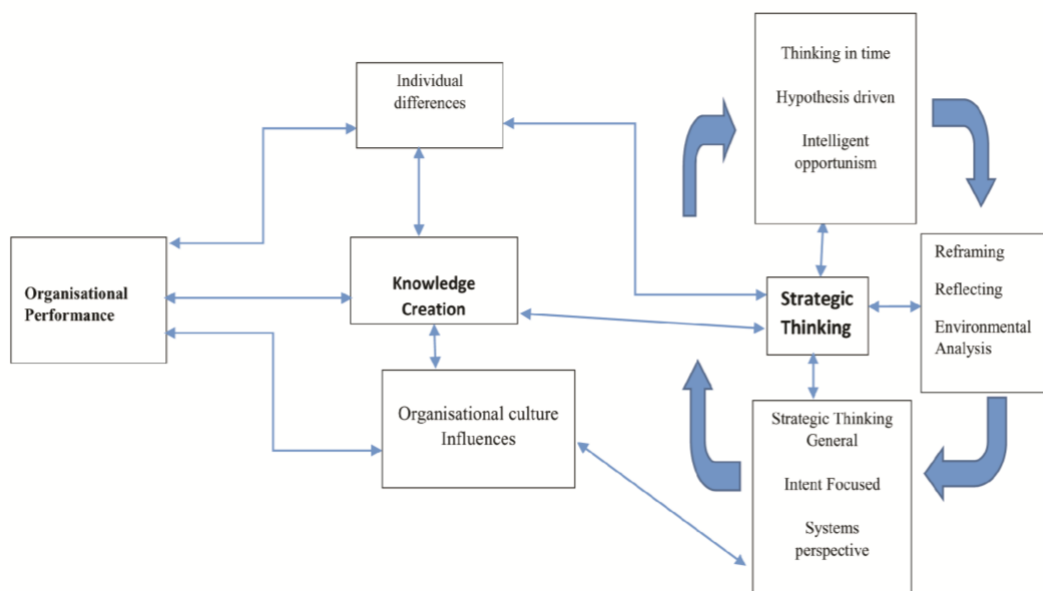


Figure 1: Modified model of learning to think strategically, *Source:* Casey and Goldman, 2010

The Modified Learning Model of strategic thinking is suggested as above and the same is grounded in prior research, theories of strategy, expertise development, adult learning and the learning School (Mintzberg, 1994, Goldman & Casey, 2010). If we accept that an individual will be thinking strategically when they complete the developmental activity of strategic thinking general, thinking in time, Intent focused, systems perspective, intelligent opportunism, hypothesis driven, reframing, reflecting and environmental analysis, then the adaptation from Goldman & Casey (2010) is of great significance.

Developing A Qualitative Research Design and A Case Study

The paper adopted a qualitative research design to undertake a single case study (Creswell, 2014) of the University of Zambia. This study sought data from document analysis. Document analysis requires that data be examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Thus, review of documents and archival records both published and unpublished was made covering meeting papers, financial reports, workshop outputs, past and present strategic plans, work plans and annual reports. The methodology in this study also used direct observation and sense making to gather more evidence.

The author has participated in a number of specific meetings and workshops that were intended to discuss the initiatives to transform the University of Zambia. Some of these include the development of Re-modelling of Income Generation Paper I, II and III from 2015 to 2019 and the institutional diagnosis meeting held in September 2017.

The aim behind the case study approach in this study is to achieve a deep understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within a specific context and using multiple sources of data (Yin, 2014). Arising from the limited knowledge on strategic thinking in the management of public universities, a case study design provided a holistic understanding of the phenomenon within the context of the University of Zambia (Denscombe, 2014).

Data analysis was undertaken as a response to the objectives of this study. The document analysis technique was used in this study and this entailed collecting the various documents and examining them in terms of the use of strategic thinking variables. The study involved describing some of the specific instances where strategic thinking variables were used and identifying instances where the use of strategic thinking variables could not be established.

Strategic Thinking Phases at the University of Zambia

There are three phases in the evolution of strategic thinking at the University of Zambia. The presentation of results and discussion are done in line with the subheadings which were derived from the objectives of this research paper.

The Pre-strategic Thinking Phase (1966 – 1993)

The pre-strategic thinking phase is covered by a time when strategic thinking theory had not yet been developed. The period 1966 to 1994 represents a period when the University of Zambia did not have a clearly articulated and documented strategic plan. The absence of a strategic plan suggests the absence or limited use of systems thinking skills. It is worth noting that by the close of the First Republic in 1973, government had invested significant amounts in the education sector and laid a very strong base for its future growth. Lulat (1982) cited in Masaiti (2018) explains that after independence, Zambia allocated over a fifth of its budget to education enabling the expansion of this sector. The strategy for the development of the higher education sector was not clearly articulated at this point. What is clear is that the intention of the Government was to increase access and develop the manpower required for nation building.

UNZA (2008) explains that the University of Zambia is a post-independence creation, whose major mandate was to produce the nation's high level human resource. Within this context, the University of Zambia existed as a strategic human resource development arm of the Government of the Republic of Zambia with a specific focus on teaching, learning, research and public service. Theoretically, it can be argued that the University was using an incrementalist approach to strategy. Strategic thinking and decision making were embedded in the national development plan and emerged at University level from day to day decision making and visionary processes. The first formalized strategic plan was published for the period 1994 to 1998, twenty - three years after the establishment of the University of Zambia. Although the University was not ineptly managed or paralysed in any sense, the institution appears to have fallen into execution holes characterised by idle rationality where a decoupling of a University's actions both from the Institution's optimal strategy and from the strategic intentions of its decision-maker, Powell (2002) becomes apparent.

With regard to Institutional Planning, UNZA (1993) highlights that the University of Zambia had prior to the 1994 to 1998 Strategic Plan operated without a coordinated institutional planning process and that strategic decisions on resource allocation were being made on an adhoc basis without being directed at attainment of clearly defined goals. The period 1969 to 1994 was a lost opportunity for strategic thinking. UNZA (1993) also notes that strategic decisions on resource allocation were weak as evidenced by high expenditure on non-academic purposes with corresponding lack of provision in the University budget for the wide range of vital non-salary inputs to teaching and research.

The Nascent Strategic Thinking Phase (1994 – 2012)

Strategic Thinking General, Systems Thinking and Thinking in Time

In the Nascent Phase demonstrates the emergence of the use of some of the strategic thinking variables in the University and this phase is fully covered by strategic plans for the periods 1994 to 1998, 1999 to 2003, 2002 to 2006 and 2008 to 2012 respectively.

In the Strategic Plan 1994 to 1998, UNZA (1993) it is observed that *there had been endemic failure to deal with disciplinary cases quickly and decisively and that this had eroded confidence in the authority of the university*. The document further indicated that *management of time at the University of Zambia was very prodigal at all staff levels with little recognition that this was one of the most costly and valuable of the resources of the university*. This information demonstrates the existence of the element of assessing the past and the present in order to determine the future to pursue within the context of the sub-variable thinking in time.

However, the sub-variable thinking in time and its dimensions pertaining to the assessment of the past and the present in order to determine the future to pursue, use of information available to establish existing gaps and how to address them, could not be established in all the subsequent years of the nascent strategic thinking phase except in UNZA (2010) where the Annual Report of that year acknowledges *failure to complete job evaluations and how this had inhibited development of an optimal staff establishment*.

A further analysis of the 1994 to 1998 Strategic Plan document shows that leaders identified the issues facing them as: *decline of government funding; dilapidation of the physical infrastructure; deterioration of the academic environment; Lack of a sustained, dynamic and managerial leadership; A highly collegial, bureaucratic and centralized system; Redundant procedures that make it difficult for the teaching Schools to respond rapidly and flexibly to national needs; A highly centralised financial control system; A budgeting and accounting system too weak to cope with the crisis of underfunding; Absence of incentives to promote efficiency in the use of resources; No system for appraising the functioning of the University or for monitoring the performance of its academic and other staff; defined criteria for appointment and promotion of non - academic staff.*

Using the variables strategic thinking general and thinking in time, it was established that the University searched for solutions as outlined in the Strategic Plan, (UNZA, 1993). The Strategic Plan document of 1994 to 1998 outlined the objectives for consolidation and development *that the University would pursue excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, Promote learning by offering opportunities for advanced education to all suitably qualified persons, without distinction; advance national development through the application of learning and research; . Enhance Zambia's potential to promote the wider goals of the African and international communities; and, marshal and efficiently manage the necessary resources,* (UNZA, 1993).

Strategic thinking general requires planning for the desired level of performance and offering encouragement to different staff. However, there was no other documentary evidence in the subsequent years of the implementation of the 1994 to 1998 strategic plan to show the use of the variable strategic thinking general.

UNZA (1993) discusses the decision *to commission national surveys to obtain specific and accurate data on man-power needs related to programmes in its Schools. Further, the University decided to commission tracer studies in specific programmes in order to evaluate externally the quality of studies undertaken in the University and their relevance to employment needs and the work practice in the market.*

Within the context of the systems perspective in strategic thinking, the search for cause on quality of study was framed aimed at making internal changes. In the period 1994 to 2001, there was no evidence of the use of the systems perspective to make internal changes as a response to external changes. In the period 2002 to 2006, this evidence is found in the accompanying strategic plan and the UNZA (2005) Annual Report alludes to one change made namely updates to existing curricular in several Schools.

The period 2002 to 2006 was covered by a Strategic Plan. However, this document did not demonstrate the use of the three strategic thinking variables. The Annual Report UNZA (2005) records that the University of Zambia had not produced audited financial statements from 1998. In this report, the long-standing issue of a backlog of unaudited financial reports was revisited and the NUFFIV fund from the Netherlands provided access to among others finance to enable external audit of the University's accounts for the period 2003 to 2005. This step suggests the use of the strategic thinking general dimension of identifying mistakes made and searching for a solution to what led to non-production of audited financial statements. The year 2007 was not covered by a Strategic Plan and there was no strategy document to demonstrate the use of strategic thinking variables in this operating year.

In the 2008 to 2012 Strategic Plan it was decided to institutionalize quarterly financial reports for Schools and Units. Arising from this, the university implemented preparation of quarterly management accounts. Like the delay in producing audited financial statements, delays in preparation of management accounts inhibited the practice of the sub variable thinking in time in that timely information which could be used to establish gaps and interventions to address them was not being produced on time.

The period 2008 to 2012 was covered by a strategic plan which from a strategic thinking general perspective outlined mistakes made. In line with thinking in time and systems thinking, the strategic plan document searched for solutions through outlining eight strategic directions namely; *promote excellence in teaching and learning; improve the quality and output of research and consultancy research; strengthen financial management and diversify sources of income; strengthen management systems; improve staffing levels; increase the scope and maintenance of physical infrastructure; improve the state of library and ICT facilities,* (UNZA, 2008).

In the nascent strategic planning period, the systems perspective dimensions covering understanding how people in the situation are connected to each other and investigating action being taken to correct discrepancy between desired output and what exists could not be established. However, the strategic plan for the period 2008 to 2012, (UNZA, 2008) recognized UNZA's debt as standing at K262 billion as of 31st December 2007 and a decision was made to liquidate the same in a systematic manner at 20 percent per annum. Evidence in the subsequent reporting years shows that this was not achieved and a discussion of the discrepancy in the context of the systems perspective was not available.

The findings show that from a systems perspective, the cause for poor performance of the University as supported by UNZA (1993) is attributed to the managerial implications for doing business which were not in line with the University Act. This finding is consistent with the use of the systems perspective to strategic thinking where internal changes must be made to respond to external changes. However, evidence of the intelligent opportunism perspective to take advantage of regulatory reform in order to make the University operate more as business enterprise within provisions of an amended Act could not be established.

In the Strategic Plan 1999 to 2003, UNZA (1999) demonstrates the use of the strategic thinking general. With regards to mistakes made, it is indicated that the Government decided to diminish priority for higher education with preference being given to basic education because of the latter's perceived higher social return. It is also indicated that the Structural Adjustment Programme adopted

by the Government had not favored the policy of free education and government subsidies and advocated for social sectors like education to be run on a cost sharing basis. The document also identifies a mistake made in the wide disparity between the numbers of individuals demanding entry into the University of Zambia and those that finally get admitted. However, from the systems perspective, the document does not identify the forces which are at work in driving this discrepancy. Further, the document did not articulate how staff in the university were inter-connected to contribute to the student application and admission disparity.

Consistent with strategic thinking general and the systems perspective, UNZA (1999) in the search for solutions to the challenges the University was facing outlined ten objectives for the period 1999 to 2003 as follows: *Undergraduate Training and Education; Postgraduate Education; High Quality and Relevant Research; life-long learning; Education and training; International Perspective; Diversify the University's resource base; transform the management and other structures; Management of the University's resources; Equitable access.*

Hypothesis Driven, Reframing Skills and Reflecting Skills

In the nascent phase there was limited use of the sub-variable hypothesis driven. In the period 1994 to 1998 Strategic Plan, (UNZA, 1993) and the years that are covered by the plan did not demonstrate an alignment to the search for fundamental long term corrective measures except in in MHEST (1989) when the new policy measures for the financing of higher education were introduced by the Government of the Republic of Zambia. The same gap in the use of the said strategic thinking variables is seen in the period covered by the Strategic Plan 1999 to 2003. Although UNZA (1999) provided for a specific objective to *transform the management and other structures of the University*, this objective did not articulate plans to change the organization structure as a response to the new strategic plan with a view to achieving significant and enduring improvements.

In the Strategic Plan in UNZA (2002) and the Strategic Plan in UNZA (2008) demonstrated the use of the sub-variable hypothesis driven dimension of searching for fundamental long-term measures. What is missing though is the evidence of the use of this variable in the implementation years and it is not until 2005 that the UNZA (2005) reports a commitment to resolving the backlog in submission of externally audited financial statements. Within the context of the same sub-variable, there were no changes to the organization structure that could lead to significant enduring improvement. A desire to do so is expressed in UNZA (2002) and in UNZA (2008) with the only major development being approval of the IOTA staff establishment in 2001.

The use of the strategic thinking sub-variable reframing could not be identified in the nascent phase. Within the context of this sub-variable, the use of different viewpoints to map out strategies is only confirmed in the development of the 1994 to 1998 strategic plan where it is said *input was sought from several internal and external constituencies in the development of the strategic plan*. The same could not be established in the subsequent strategy documents.

The use of the sub-variable environmental analysis appeared to occur only when developing the 1994 to 1998 strategic plan, UNZA (1993). Environmental analysis was not undertaken in the subsequent years and in the strategic plans that followed except for the 2002 to 2006 Strategic Plan. Further, looking at the Strategic Plan 1999 to 2003, the University did not undertake an structured environmental analysis. Thus, the University strengths and opportunities within the context of environment analysis were unclear. The strategic planning context was therefore based on challenges facing the University, consequences for declining public expenditure to the University, implications of pressures on the development and operations of the University and the University's response to challenges, UNZA (1999).

UNZA (1993) records strategic decisions made about business ventures which included acquisition of York Farm and Kashima Farm from a loan which was to be repaid from profits in the first three years and designation of Liempe Farm, the University Bookshop, the Horticultural Nursery, the Tea Bar and Marshlands as business ventures that would not be funded by the University. However, when traced from 1994 to 2020, it is found that business ventures were still funded by the University indicating constrained focused intent, intelligent opportunism, reflecting and reframing.

In the 2008 to 2012 Strategic Plan, a strategic direction focusing on strengthening the Management system was established. The intention was to decentralise in the effort to improve efficiency in decision making. Thus, the university set out to develop protocols for independent, decentralised, decision making in Schools and Units.

Within the context of the financing strategy implementation challenges by the Government and the backlog in preparation of audited financial statements, there is no documentary evidence to show the use of reflection skills in strategic thinking. Further, there was no evidence of reframing skills encompassing creative thinking to find a different way of resolving the challenges identified.

Environmental Analysis, Focused Intent and Intelligent Opportunism

Using the variable intelligent opportunism, it was found that the University was conscious in the available strategic plan about the problems the Institution was facing. But beyond the strategic plan the sub-variables of focussed intent and intelligent opportunism could not be established.

The use of the sub variable focused intent and its dimensions was only found in the dimension leadership commitment to resolve problems as evidenced in the 1994 to 1998 strategic plan and the 2010 Annual Report, (UNZA, 2010) where Management made efforts to reduce the UNZA debt arising from accrued retirement benefits and contract obligations.

In the 1994 to 1998 Strategic Plan, a decision was made *to focus on postgraduate studies and the University set out to dedicate significant institutional resources to postgraduate programmes and students*, (UNZA, 1993). This was aligned to the use of the strategic thinking variable thinking in time and systems perspective where all the Schools were to pursue a stronger focus on postgraduate training. In Strategic Plan 1999 to 2003, UNZA (1999) reports a continued resolve to *expand the capacity for postgraduate education*. This attribute in strategic thinking is associated with focused intent by the University. Further, this decision demonstrates use of the strategic thinking variable intelligent opportunism where the University was seeking to find a new competitive niche through postgraduate training. The challenge however, is that the University was not achieving this outcome and contrary to the systems perspective, the University did not demonstrate any action that was taken to correct the discrepancy between desired postgraduate numbers and what existed.

The strategic thinking variable intelligent opportunism comes out in the strategy for driving postgraduate education. However, in the absence of the use of the variable focused intent, this vision is lost in the years that follow. One of the difficulties UNZA faces is the inadequacy of the linkage between the strategic plans and year on year work plans. Given its public nature, UNZA encourages preparation of work-plans but the linkage to institutional strategic thinking is not clear. Porter (1980) contends that competitive strategy is the search for a favorable competitive position in the industry, which can erode or improve, depending on a firm's choice of strategy. The conceptual typology is founded in three pillars namely cost leadership, differentiation and focus strategies.

A firm must make a choice between one of the three generic strategies or else it will be "stuck in the middle" and suffer from below-average performance, (Porter, 1980). UNZA faces a strategy gap in that the Institution has not clarified which generic strategy underpins its strategic plans. Orton and Weick (1990) explain that unfortunately organisations continue to think that planning is a good thing and they spend much time on planning, and actions are assessed in terms of their fit with plans...administrators are baffled and angered when things never happen the way they are supposed to. The year 2007 was characterized by the absence of a strategic plan.

The Evolutionary Strategic Thinking Phase: 2013 - 2022

Strategic Thinking General, Systems Thinking and Thinking in Time

In the evolutionary strategic thinking phase, the search for solutions dimension in strategic thinking general is outlined in the 2013 to 2017 strategic plan, UNZA (2017a) in its nine strategic directions covering: *Excellence in Teaching, learning, Research and Consultancy; Financial and Administrative Management Systems; Business Ventures; Human Resource Capacity and Management; Infrastructure; Quality Assurance Systems; Information and Communication Technology; Open and Distance Learning; Freedom from Liability and; Beneficial Partnerships*.

Further, the 2018 to 2022 Strategic Plan in UNZA (2017b) extends the search for solutions and planning for a desired level of performance in strategic thinking general by outlining seven strategic directions. namely: *Excellence in Teaching and learning; Excellence in Publishing and Research; Community Development; Corporate Brand; Physical and Virtual Infrastructure; Financial Sustainability; Governance and Management Support Functions*.

The dimension planning for the desired level of performance in strategic thinking general was also established in the *Report on the Institutional Diagnosis Workshop*, UNZA (2017c), the annual budgets in each year of the evolutionary phase, School and Unit Work-plans and the Re-modelling of Income Generation paper, UNZA (2019b). However, the University exhibited a gap in the dimension to offer encouragement to staff in strategic thinking general in that apart from the evidence of the annual labour awards held every year, no other intervention was established.

In the 2013 to 2017 Strategic Plan, UNZA (2012) observes that *Councillors representing certain stakeholder interest groups are compromised in terms of their objectivity in decision making on matters that may involve their interest*. This indication is aligned to thinking in time about establishing the existing gaps and how to address them. However, despite this concern, the period 2015 to 2020 is characterized by lack of strategic decision making to change the way the university was governed at Council level.

The dimension in the strategic thinking sub-variable thinking in time relating to assessing the past and present in order to determine the future to pursue was not established in the strategic plan 2013 to 2017. The mid-term review of the strategic plan 2013 to 2017 was done in December 2015. This was one year later than the ideal mid-term review timeline. Liedtka (1998) observes that such a practice limits the use of the strategic thinking variable thinking in time because managers lose time to connect the past, present and future in their decision-making. This is because the lessons that the organization takes from precedents boost its ability to respond to the changes in the external or internal environment, (Capron and Mitchell, 2009). The sub-variable thinking in time was however established in the review of the pensions and benefits schemes for the three public universities and research institutions, MESTVTEE (2012) of the Strategic Plan 2013 – 2017. In the evolutionary period, it is only the Re-modelling of Income Generation documents, (2017b and 2019b) along with the Situation Analysis in UNZA (2017) that guided the use of information available to establish existing gaps and address them in the sub - variable thinking in time.

The use of the systems perspective to identify forces which affected the University was only limited to the situation analysis and SWOT analysis in the strategic plans, (UNZA, 2013 and UNZA, 2017c) respectively. In addition to the strategic directions outlined in the strategic plans covering this phase, the University looked for fundamental long-term corrective measures as documented in the

Status Report on harmonisation of salaries and conditions of service for the University of Zambia, UNZA (2015c) and the Minister's Statement on *University Staff Terms and Conditions of Service Policy Guidelines*, (UNZA, 2012). Within the systems perspective, there was, however, no evidence of the University's attempt to establish how its people in every business situation were connected to each other and investigate action being taken to correct the discrepancy between desired output and actual output.

In an attempt to address the weaknesses in systems thinking, the 2013 to 2017 strategic plan dedicated a distinct strategic direction to enhance human resource capacity and management. Among the tactics was the intention to build capacity in development, planning and decision making. However, there was limited evidence of capacity building initiatives undertaken for non academic staff in the said strategic planning cycle. What is dominant in capacity building are the long-term staff development programmes extended to academic staff.

Hypothesis Driven, Reframing Skills and Reflecting Skills

The finding on the use of the sub-variable hypothesis drive indicates that changes in the organisation structure aimed at significant enduring improvement were made by restructuring the School of Medicine into four Schools, (UNZA, 2015) and the report on the *Decentralisation of the Directorate of Research and Graduate Studies functions*, (UNZA 2019d).

The 2013 to 2017 Strategic Plan dedicated a strategic direction with freeing the university from liabilities at its centre. According to this strategic plan, *100 percent of the liabilities were to be liquidated*. To the contrary, both the 2008 – 2012 Strategic Plan and the 2013 – 2017 Strategic Plan implementation periods missed the opportunity to reverse UNZA's growing debt. The application of reflecting skills to frame this problem from different perspectives and reframing skills is highlighted in the Annual Report, UNZA (2016) which indicates that UNZA's deficit was growing at the rate of K200 million per annum and recommended cost saving measures on honorarium, terminal benefits, excess teaching load, bulk buying, stock management, allowances, shared services and housing allowance to prevent further escalation of the debt.

In the hypothesis driven sub-variable, findings show that there were no articulated internal changes made to respond to external changes in the Strategic Plan 2013 to 2017. However, UNZA (2015a) reports that new programmes were introduced. Further, in UNZA (2014) reports that the structure and outlook of the University's website was changed with the Schools given more latitude to own their sub-website. UNZA (2015d) also reports the launch of the Graduate School of Business in August 2015, on one part, and the setup of UNZA Gateway – a consultancy promoting department on the other part. Further, the University of Zambia introduced an outsourced e-learning platform to support the Graduate School of Business and the Institute for Distance Education in 2015 and further introduced Moodle e-learning platform in 2020.

Findings on the use of reframing skills to seek different perspectives were limited to the *Report on the Institutional Diagnosis Workshop*, (UNZA 2017c), and the cost saving measures outlined in UNZA (2015d). The use of reframing skills to track trends by asking everyone if they notice changes in the organisation's context were not used in the significant part of the evolutionary phase. Evidence of the use of this dimension only begun to show in 2020 to interrogate the declining student applications and the declining student enrolments. Within the context of reframing skills the committee system used in University governance shows engagement in discussions with staff whose values may be different.

Findings further show a significant absence of reflecting skills in the University. Specifically, the dimensions pertaining to asking why questions when trying to solve a problem, framing problems from different perspectives, and reconstructing an experience and setting aside to think about why the organisation succeeded or failed could not be established.

Environmental Analysis, Focused Intent & Intelligent Opportunism

In any intelligent organisation, analysis of its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) never ends; the search for opportunities from different perspectives is ongoing (Liedtka, 1998; Nasabee, Jahani, & Safarpour, 2009). SWOT analysis involves interaction and communication of possibilities and ideas at all levels of management, which encourages employee engagement and involvement. This process ultimately increases organisational performance. With regard to the University of Zambia, there was no evidence of an ongoing SWOT analysis or updating of the SWOT analysis established in the Strategic Plan documents of 2013 to 2017 and 2018 to 2022 respectively. It appears SWOT analysis, internal and external analysis of the higher education sector, and identifying strategic issues at the University of Zambia ends at the Strategic plan development stage and the same documents are used for the attendant years of the strategic plan.

Prior findings in Liedtka (1998) indicate that for an organization to think strategically, it must spot, evaluate and react to potential opportunities as they come. In this way, strategies and the vision cease to be static but are modified taking into account the dynamic nature of the internal and external environment. Thus, in the absence of the continuous practice of environment analysis, organisational learning at the University of Zambia can be said to be taking place with limited information.

Looking at the sub-variable intelligent opportunism further, findings on the awareness of the participation of middle managers show that apart from the involvement of middle managers and other staff in the development of work-plans, there is no indication to show awareness of the participation of middle managers in strategic thinking to contribute to intelligent opportunism. In conceptualising the ability, motivation and opportunities model (AMO), Lepak, Liao, Chung, & Harden, (2006) suggested that while individuals may

have the ability and are motivated to perform, it is important that organisations provide them with appropriate opportunities to use their skills.

The 2016 Annual Report, (UNZA 2016) reported end of year losses in all the business ventures. UNZA (2019a) identifies the reasons for poor performance as undercapitalization, uncompetitive structures with staff costs commanding 60 percent of the business venture expenses. This finding conforms with the strategic thinking variable intelligent opportunism with regard to organisational consciousness about the main strategic problems of the University.

With regard to business ventures, however, the gap is that despite the cost – efficiency assessment of the business ventures made in 2004 and the evident year on year negative out-turn, there was no strategic decision that was taken to turnaround the performance of the business ventures. This finding suggests a limited use of the strategic thinking variable thinking in time as no evidence was established to show what business strategy UNZA was putting in place to turnaround the business ventures.

Could the challenges that the business ventures face, also suggest the limited use of intelligent opportunism? For the University of Zambia business ventures, it is not until the 2018 to 2022 strategic plan that a strategic decision was made to setup UNZA Holdings Limited, a private entity which would host all the business ventures.

Weick (1976) cited the loosely coupled nature of universities as a major hindrance to the way they could respond to strategy thinking. The reality is that the University of Zambia is a loosely coupled organization. It is possible for one Unit to be performing while other units covered by the same strategic plan are underperforming. It is also possible given the committee system of governance prevalent in public universities for a committee to slow down, impede or enable the implementation of a strategic decision. Mortimer & Sathre (2007) add that it is debatable what influence unions have on institutional governance, but unions may exercise varying degrees of authority on issues ranging from promotion and tenure policies, salaries and benefits to being consulted on institutional budget matters; each of which may impact an institution's ability to set a certain strategic direction.

The institutional nature of universities has slowed their evolution and in the process hindered strategy to the extent that this has made the whole idea of strategy a mere window dressing, which is not linked to day to day decision making, Intsiful & Maassen (2017). In the context of the 2018 to 2022 Strategic Plan, it was developed at a time when the University of Zambia had built sufficient experience from the last strategic plans. Yet, it still took a linear approach to strategic thinking as has been seen in all the six strategic plans spanning 1994 to 2022. How can we help University Managers to see the difference between strategic thinking and strategic planning? Planning is based on linear and rational thinking, whereas strategic thinking is based on the need for recognition of new possibilities and the ability to pull pieces together into a big picture (Mintzberg, 1994). In the narrow view of strategic thinking, Mintzberg (1994) and Ohmae (1982) points out that the focus is on high level issues of mission and vision for the organization.

Linear thinking has been criticised for its failure to solve problems that are complex that have a nonlinear structure or nature. Social reality under the linear model is mediated through the assumption that the organisation needs to be tightly coupled, so that all decisions made at the top can be implemented throughout the organization. The idea in tight - coupling is that intentions must translate into actions.

Conclusions

The study has established that in the pre-strategic thinking phase, the University appeared to have been guided by the national development agenda for human capital development. The implication is that a shift in national policy on higher education therefore impacts the University of Zambia significantly and in the absence of the practice of strategic thinking, a disconnection between optimal strategy and the strategic intentions of the University Managers will continue to contribute to adverse performance outcomes.

The study has also established that in the nascent strategic thinking phase, significant gaps exist in the utilization of strategic thinking variables. In particular, thinking in time, reframing, reflecting, environmental analysis, focused intent and intelligent opportunism were significantly not used year on year. Annual work-plans and business plans are a useful place for the intentions in the strategic plans to be revisited through reflective thinking and reframing. In their absence, the implication is that the University of Zambia is left to rely on an environmental analysis which may have been appropriate at the strategic planning stage and not in the attendant years of strategy implementation.

In the evolutionary phase, the study established that there was a growing level of use of the strategic thinking variables per strategic planning cycle and insignificantly on a year to year basis. The limited use of strategic thinking variables still remain evident in intelligent opportunism, environmental analysis, reflecting skills, reframing skills and thinking in time. In the absence of the attribute thinking in time, the implication is delayed and in some cases non responsiveness to the changing internal and external environment for higher education. Some of the interventions required to reverse the adverse financial performance of the University of Zambia could have been implemented in the past or the nascent phase had full utilization of the strategic thinking variables been in practice. The belief that strategic planning is all that is required has had adverse implications for strategic thinking. Evidence shows that the Institution has placed significant emphasis on intended strategy as articulated in the strategic plans. While the strategic plans have remained static over the implementation period, the internal and external dynamics attendant to each static strategic plan have been changing. The absence of emergent strategy points to under-utilisation of strategic thinking capacity and this will have implications for delaying organisational change towards competitiveness and financial sustainability.

Policy makers have a responsibility to ensure expansion in the use of strategic thinking variables by the University of Zambia to cover all its sub-variables. Necessary adjustments to university governance must be made to encourage inclusiveness in the practice of strategic thinking at all levels and by many staff in the University. The conclusions reported in this study should be interpreted with an appropriate recognition of their potential limitations, which should be addressed in future studies. Data on all variables of the study were collected from archival records and document analysis. Therefore, the results were vulnerable to common method bias, which may be addressed by a study which will seek more evidence through triangulation of data. Further, the current study demonstrated the significance of strategic thinking in decision making and enhancement of university performance. Further studies could be undertaken on other organizational typologies that could explain the challenges public universities in Zambia face.

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